DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 481 344 CE 085 555

AUTHOR	Owen, Jane; Robson, Andy; Yarrow, Dave; Appleby, Alex
TITLE	Learning Excellence: How Do Learning Providers Measure Up to the Benchmarks of Service Excellence?
INSTITUTION	Learning and Skills Development Agency, London (England).
SPONS AGENCY	Learning and Skills Council, Coventry (England).
ISBN	ISBN-1-85338-836-X
PUB DATE	2003-00-00
NOTE	54p.; Part of the Raising Quality and Achievement Programme run in partnership with the Association of Colleges and the Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion. For a related document, see ED 473 655.
AVAILABLE FROM	Learning and Skills Development Agency, Regent Arcade House, 19-25 Argyll Street, London W1F 7LS, United Kingdom (Ref. No. 1444). Tel: 020 7297 9000; Fax: 020 7297 9001; Web site: http://www.lsda.org.uk/home.asp. For full text: http://www.lsda.org.uk/files/pdf/1444.pdf.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Evaluative (142)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC03 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Adult Education; Adult Programs; *Benchmarking; College Programs; Colleges; *Educational Quality; Employment Practices; Foreign Countries; Organizational Culture; Organizational Effectiveness; Performance Factors; *Performance Technology; Postsecondary Education; Program Effectiveness; *Program Evaluation; School Business Relationship; Self Evaluation (Groups); *Standards; Theory Practice Relationship; Total Quality Management
IDENTIFIERS	Customer Services; *Learning Organizations; Service Quality; United Kingdom; Work Based Learning

ABSTRACT

In order for learning providers to become learning organizations, their services must be delivered effectively. The Learning PROBE (Promoting Business Excellence) was created for the learning and skills sector and was in use by nearly 100 colleges and work-based learning (WBL) providers by April 2003. PROBE has assisted 3000 organizations across the world in reviewing their performance and practices by measuring themselves against their peers, against world-class benchmarks of service excellence, and against the achievements and practices of organizations in other sectors. Key findings based upon the first 48 learning providers to complete the Learning PROBE benchmarking process are as follows: (1) the application of good practice leads to improved service and business performance; (2) none have yet achieved the standards of a "world-class" service organization, but 46% are contenders for this status; (3) good performance that is not underpinned by good practice has resulted in outcomes achieved at a high cost in financial and human terms; (4) strongest practices relate to the staff and their contribution to success; (5) colleges are results-oriented, with strengths apparent in business performance, productivity, and service quality; (6) similar patterns of strength and opportunity will likely characterize WBL providers; and (7) one of the weakest practice areas is continuous improvement. (Contains 6 figures, 10 tables, 8 references, and an appendix entitled "Taking Part in Learning PROBE.") (MO)

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learning excellence

how do learning providers measure up to the benchmarks of service excellence?

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- We aim to reach all colleges and work-based learning providers.
- We offer extra support to colleges and work-based learning providers that are receiving Standards Fund money to improve their practice.
- All our activity themes are backed by a programme of research and evaluation.
- The Raising Quality and Achievement Programme is funded by a grant to the Learning and Skills Development Agency from the Learning and Skills Council.

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Published by the Learning and Skills Development Agency

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Registered with the Charity Commissioners

Copyeditor: Karin Fancett
Designers: Dave Shaw and Tania Field
Cover illustrator: Joel Quartey
Printer: Blackmore Ltd, Shaftesbury, Dorset

1444/08/03/5000

ISBN 1 85338 836 X

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The Raising Quality and Achievement Programme is funded by a grant to the Learning and Skills Development Agency from the Learning and Skills Council.

Contents

Acknowledgements

Foreword

Introduction 1

The publication

The background

Learning PROBE key findings 3

Summary of colleges' strengths and opportunities for improvement

Why PROBE? 7

PROBE – diagnostic benchmarking 9

Learning PROBE – adapting for the sector

The Learning PROBE project 15

Additional benefits of Learning PROBE 19

Results of the analysis 21

Overview of results

Practice and performance

Work-based learning providers 39

Challenges facing the learning and skills sector 41

Appendix Taking part in Learning PROBE 43

Getting approval

The team

The questionnaire

The facilitation day

The report

Next steps

Learning PROBE steps

Useful links 47

References 48

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to the many colleges and work-based learning providers, and their staff, who have participated in the Learning PROBE benchmarking programme. By necessity, they remain anonymous, but their efforts, their openness and their cooperation are greatly appreciated.

Special thanks are also due to those who helped to design the benchmarking approach and to pilot and adapt the PROBE tools to the needs of the learning and skills sector, including Richard Benefer of Stoke College and David Cheetham of Gateshead College.

We would also like to thank Tyne and Wear Learning and Skills Council, particularly Les Kirby, for support with the extension of the programme to encompass work-based learning providers as well as colleges.

Learning PROBE is an adaptation of the survey instrument from the International Service Study (1997). Thanks are due for the support of the ISS principal investigators, Chris A. Voss, London Business School; Aleda V. Roth, Kenan-Flagler Business School at the University of North Carolina; and Richard B. Chase, Marshall School of Business at the University of Southern California.

Our thanks also go to:

- the PROBE partnership for support and permission to adapt and deploy the PROBE tool
- the CBI, particularly Mindy Wilson, for help and support
- Newcastle Business School colleagues and associates, including Ed Mitchell, Graham Pike, Dave Procter and Mandy Allen
- Business Link County Durham and their 'parent company' A4E, partners in the development and deployment of the Micro Business Review benchmarking tool.

Foreword

As a college governor over the last 15 years I have been part of a process that has seen a succession of business people like me attempting to bring their commercial experiences to bear on the world of further education. It has been a journey in which we have all been learning. Not all of our worthy attempts to use familiar business approaches have found a natural home in the management of a large education facility. What we do have in common is a passion for meeting and exceeding the expectations of our customers. However impressive our post-incorporation building programmes, it is clear that our real achievements will never be better than the quality of the student experience. We are in a competitive world in which we need to embrace anything we can in order to help us systematically make the journey towards organisational excellence.

The PROBE tool was first developed in 1992 to help manufacturing companies to emulate the Japanese shop floor miracle of the 1980s. My team in IBM gave birth to the approach with the essential help and inspiration of Professor Chris Voss at the London Business School. Since then thousands of manufacturing sites across the world have made great strides towards becoming world class and I have had the privilege of seeing incredible transformations that started with an honest self-assessment using PROBE. The enemy of progress has often not been ignorance but complacency. We typically think we are much better than we really are. PROBE seeks to separate the rhetoric from the reality. Since its original inception PROBE has been successfully developed for the services, health, education and agriculture sectors.

In the early days of developing Learning PROBE it was piloted at my own college and it was with enormous pride that some years later I was able to see the college principal collect the Midlands Excellence Award at a glittering ceremony at the Birmingham International Convention Centre. There must, however, be no complacency. This is one of those journeys in which the further you go, the more you see there is still to do. It is a journey that has no end.

All colleges must aspire to being 'excellent colleges' and we are indebted to Jane Owen and her colleagues at the Learning and Skills Development Agency and to David Yarrow and his team at the Centre for Business Excellence at the Northumbria University for making this approach accessible to us all. This report begins the process of sharing the findings from the programme as a whole. I hope that those colleges and other learning providers who have not yet used Learning PROBE will be encouraged to do so and that those who have will find continued energy for their journey.

Philip Hanson
Chairman of Governors, Solihull College

Introduction

The publication

This publication is intended to explain how PROBE was developed and adapted for the learning and skills sector, resulting in the use of Learning PROBE and its small business version by nearly 100 colleges and work-based learning (WBL) providers by April 2003. It also reflects the lessons learnt by the first 48 learning providers to complete the Learning PROBE benchmarking process. Though the initial group are all colleges, the programme has now been adapted and expanded to include WBL providers, and the early results are also reported. At the time of the analysis, many more WBL providers and colleges were preparing to participate, and local Learning and Skills Councils (LSCs) were working with the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) to ensure that they and their local providers benefited from the opportunity to review, to learn, to plan and to improve – in other words, to make continuous improvement a reality throughout the learning and skills sector.

The background

Learning has never been as important as it is in today's turbulent world. It is fundamental to everything we do, in every walk of life, at every stage of life. Learning holds the key to many of the problems and challenges which beset us as individuals, as a society, and as an economy. In many ways, our future depends upon the delivery of that most important of visions – a community of lifelong learners, a learning society.

To fulfil the role of a learning provider is both a privilege and a responsibility. So much depends on the provider's ability to inspire, to deliver, to support, to serve the needs of its learners ... its customers. Learning providers are organisations managed and staffed by dedicated people who care deeply about their learners, and do everything in their power to facilitate effective learning. They strive to improve their skills, their knowledge, their resources, their approaches, their delivery and their support processes. If learning providers can themselves become learning organisations, their services will be delivered more and more effectively, and one of society's most important functions will be one of the best fulfilled. If LSCs, and others who commission and quality assure the work of learning providers, can also effectively support their further development, then progress towards that goal will be considerably enhanced.

With this in mind, the LSDA set out to help learning providers to benefit from diagnostic tools and knowledge bases, assisting providers to analyse their service delivery and the quality of their internal processes. The LSDA selected PROBE, a suite of benchmarking tools, and worked with its creators to develop Learning PROBE, a version that is user-friendly and helpful for organisations and staff in the learning and skills sector.

PROBE is a tool that has so far assisted 3000 organisations across the world to review their performance and practices. The identity of each participant, and their individual data, are strictly confidential; however, each new participant can compare their practices and performance against an extensive and rich database, representing experiences and ideas drawn from organisations in many sectors which are committed to learning and improving. Learning providers can measure themselves against their peers, against world-class benchmarks of service excellence, and against the achievements and practices of organisations in other sectors, whose different approaches to generic issues can stimulate fresh insights and ideas.

Learning PROBE key findings

1. The experiences of the first 48 colleges confirm that the application of good practice leads to improved service and business performance.
2. None of the colleges has yet achieved the standards of a 'world-class' service organisation; 46% are contenders for world-class status, which is encouraging, but suggests that the sector has some work to do to catch up with other parts of the UK service sector.
3. A high proportion display good performance that does not appear to be underpinned by good practice, suggesting that outcomes are achieved at a high cost in financial and human terms, leaving the organisation somewhat vulnerable and ill-prepared for further development or growth; findings from a separate staff survey, involving some of the same colleges, support this interpretation.
4. Colleges' strongest practices relate to the staff and their contribution to success; empowerment and innovativeness are strengths, but the virtuous cycle of people management practices which characterises leading service organisations is less evident.
5. Colleges are results-oriented, with strengths apparent in business performance, productivity and service quality; however, some colleges are reluctant to commit to clear, challenging service standards, and in some cases internal perceptions of strong performance are open to question given the lack of evidence gathered through performance measurement.

6 The biggest opportunity for improvement is in the service processes which comprise the engine room of the colleges' service delivery; few are advanced in their management of processes, with fewer still delighting customers at those crucial 'moments of truth'.

7 Early indications are that similar patterns of strength and opportunity will characterise WBL providers; staff empowerment and involvement are emerging as strengths, while process management and organisational performance management exhibit room for improvement.

8 The challenge for colleges, and for the sector as a whole, is encapsulated in the fact that one of their weakest practice areas is continuous improvement; if the sector is to close the practice and performance gap on other service providers, it must first catch up with modern practices in the field of quality, improvement and the management of change.

Summary of colleges' strengths and opportunities for improvement

Table 1 presents details of strengths and opportunities for improvement identified within the colleges as a group, through the five key scales used to interpret the findings derived through Learning PROBE.

Table 1 Colleges' strengths and opportunities for improvement

Area	Strengths	Opportunities for improvement
Leadership	Relationship building	Management style
	Customer relations	Problem solving
	Staff attitude	Influencing suppliers of workforce
	Management involvement in quality leadership	Value for money
	Quality values	Elimination of 'waste'
	Supplier relationship and stability	Benchmarks
	Outsourcing	Measurement of staff satisfaction
		Management reward
Service processes		Accessibility
		Organisation structure for service and product development
		Customer input for products and services
		Management of key processes
		IT as basis for knowledge management
		IT integration
		Electronic commerce
		Problem-handling strategy for service recovery
		Education and training for quality
		Service guarantees and warranties
		Attention to staff loyalty
		Managing 'moments of truth'
People	'Real-time' staff handling of problems	Recognition and reward
	Learning organisation	Employee involvement
	Strategic role of innovation	
Performance management	Management of customer loyalty	Performance measurement and reporting
	Management attention to quality measures	Understanding markets
	Clarity of goals	Visibility and communication of standards
	Customer satisfaction measurement	Support for staff
	Challenging standards	Established service standards
Results	Cash flow	Clarity of service concept
	Return on assets	Staff satisfaction
	Overall productivity within organisation	Impact on society
	Level of customer satisfaction	
	Courtesy	
	Reliability	
	Value (quality/price)	
	Trends in customer satisfaction	
	Customer base	
	Customer retention	

Why PROBE?

The post-16 learning sector has experienced considerable change in recent times. College managers have had to develop new skills while taking on many new responsibilities since incorporation. There has been a sizeable increase in the number of people taking part in further education and service expectations have grown. The sector has expanded to include WBL providers as well as colleges, funded through the LSC. Throughout this period of change the government has continued to focus on encouraging quality improvement in the sector. The ongoing emphasis on meeting customer and stakeholder needs, together with increases in expectations, means that learning providers have to continuously improve their levels of service provision.

Rigorous self-assessment and good development planning should be an integral part of an organisation's management.

LSC (2001a) *Self-assessment and development plans.*

Self-assessment should be a systematic process in which providers collect and analyse evidence in order to make judgements about their performance in relation to agreed goals. The main purpose of self-assessment is self-improvement.

LSC (2001b) *Guidance on self-assessment and development planning.*

The Further Education Funding Council introduced self-assessment as a requirement into the FE sector in England in 1994, and it is now very much a part of colleges' management, enforced by the requirement to provide self-assessment reports (SARs) for the LSC and for inspection purposes, which are subsequently used during college inspections. Colleges also have to report on and set targets for key output performance indicators such as national benchmarks pertaining to student retention and achievement. The LSC has continued this policy within the newly enlarged sector and has produced some supporting publications.

What is benchmarking?

Metric benchmarking comparisons of outputs which can identify stronger and weaker aspects of performance.

Diagnostic benchmarking helps to pinpoint processes/practices which are causing stronger/weaker performance.

Process benchmarking an advanced approach – practices which work well elsewhere are studied for potential adoption/adaptation.

See Jane Owen's (2002) guide *Benchmarking for the learning and skills sector.*

Self-assessment reporting and target setting are useful methods of measuring quality, and stimulating thinking about achievement and improvement. However, while the results facilitate comparisons, these methods do not detail processes in a way that allows colleges to readily identify and compare good practice in a systematic and measurable way. By 1999, when the Raising Quality and Achievement (RQA) Programme was set up as part of the LSDA, the sector was used to working with metric benchmarks, but had not used diagnostic or process benchmarking to any significant degree. To further enhance the use of benchmarking within the sector it was decided to either develop a learning sector diagnostic benchmarking tool or to adapt one that was already successful in other sectors.

PROBE – diagnostic benchmarking

Learning PROBE is one of the latest developments in a suite of benchmarking tools developed over the course of a decade. The PROBE tools are recognised worldwide as a leading approach to business assessment, deployed through a network of highly credible agencies, which facilitate assessments with organisations of many types in many countries and sectors, building up a formidable set of databases and learning opportunities.

PROBE began life with the 'Made in Europe' study (Hanson *et al.* 1994), an initiative of London Business School (LBS) and IBM Consulting in the early 1990s. This study provided insights into the health of UK manufacturers and their European counterparts, which made a major impact on the UK's national industrial agenda, as evidenced by its contribution to the government's Competitiveness White Papers.

Through the mid- to late-1990s, the PROBE suite developed, to incorporate versions tailored to most sizes and types of organisation, across the full range of sectors.

Development of the PROBE suite since the mid-1990s

- After 'Made in Europe', Manufacturing PROBE rolls out internationally, enhancing database size and quality and extending reach to every continent and industrial sector.
- LBS works with the universities of Southern California and North Carolina to adapt methodology for a major UK versus US comparison of the service sectors, spawning 'Service PROBE'.
- CBI adopts the tools and promotes them nationally as the PROBE benchmarking service – PROmoting Business Excellence. Results feed policy formulation, lobbying and good practice exchange and dissemination activities.
- Newcastle Business School joins the PROBE Partnership, deploying an adapted version to achieve mass participation in benchmarking by companies in north-east England.
- The Partnership, with contributions from West London TEC and Business Link County Durham, develops 'Microscope' and 'Micro Business Review' tools, tailored to needs of small to medium and micro-sized organisations.

In recent years PROBE has been adapted to a number of sectors including health, agriculture, food and the learning and skills sector.

Countries represented in the PROBE databases

Australia	Hungary	Poland	Belgium
Iceland	Portugal	Brazil	India
Russia	Canada	Indonesia	South Africa
China	Ireland	Spain	Cyprus
Italy	Sweden	Denmark	Malaysia
Switzerland	Estonia	Mexico	Taiwan
Finland	Netherlands	UK	France
Norway	USA	Germany	Philippines

The PROBE databases contain 10 years' worth of research data. The data has drawn upon some 3000 individual site benchmarks from 32 countries, with new data being added constantly. The PROBE benchmarking process has been refined and improved, ensuring that new participants derive invaluable comparisons and insights, and identify clear improvement opportunities.

PROBE is built around a series of insights into the true meaning of organisational excellence, examining the processes and practices an organisation deploys and the performance results it achieves. The model is based upon extensive research into the key features of organisations which deliver world-class service.

Excellent *leadership* creates an environment in which the organisation's people contribute to their full potential, deploying effective and efficient *service processes* and *managing performance* in order to ensure the achievement of optimal *results*. The PROBE model promotes the Fundamental Concepts of Excellence, themselves the basis of the EFQM Excellence Model (2003), and in many organisations is used hand-in-glove with that model as complementary tools to assist organisational assessment, learning and improvement.

The Fundamental Concepts of Excellence

- Results orientation
- Customer focus
- Leadership and constancy of purpose
- Management by processes and facts
- People development and involvement
- Continuous learning, innovation and improvement
- Partnership development
- Public responsibility

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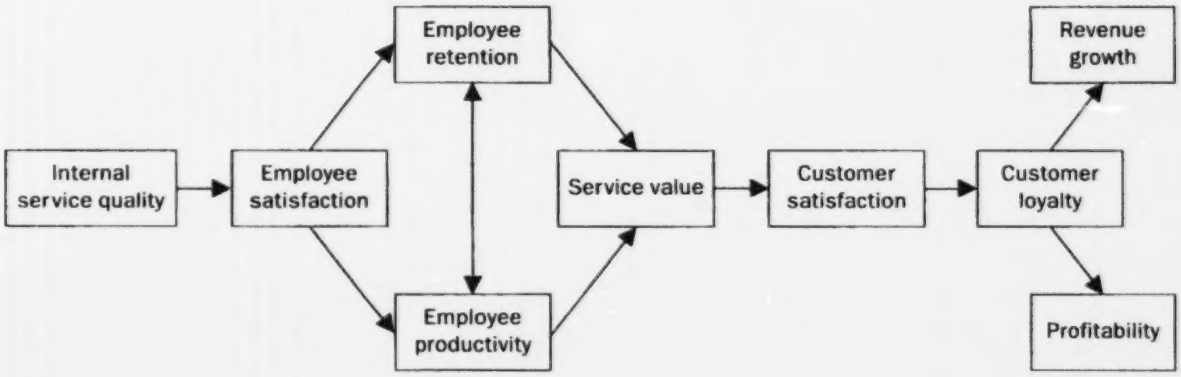
Service PROBE began life with an Anglo-American International Service Study , conducted in the mid-1990s by Professor Chris Voss of the London Business School with colleagues from business schools on the east and west coasts of the USA (Voss *et al.* 1997). The study assessed the management practices of individual service organisations and the resulting indicators of performance outcomes, drawing upon and in turn building upon the findings of the 'Service–Profit Chain' research (Heskett *et al.* 1994, see Figure 1), studies which changed the way service excellence is viewed and achieved.

Figure 1 The service–profit chain



The research highlighted the importance of customer retention, finding that in some sectors a 5% increase in customer retention can lead to as much as 100% improvement in business performance. It also found that the key reasons for customer disloyalty are associated with poor service recovery when things go wrong, discontent setting in if the customer has to deal with more than one person to get action and if the resolution takes an excessive amount of time. By contrast the intention to repurchase by a customer who has experienced excellent service recovery is almost as high as if nothing had gone wrong. The study also found that organisations which enjoy high customer satisfaction and loyalty also enjoy high employee satisfaction and loyalty.

Learning PROBE – adapting for the sector

The development of a learning and skills version of Service PROBE was carried out jointly by the RQA Programme at the LSDA and Newcastle Business School at Northumbria University. Eighteen colleges contributed to a consultation exercise, through which the benchmarking tool was adapted to the specific needs and language of the sector. The Learning PROBE programme began during the early months of 2000, and there has been a steady stream of colleges participating ever since.

Learning PROBE provided us with a summary of our strengths and weaknesses against a wider framework than those we had previously used and enabled us to assess all areas of the college against one framework.

FE college, 2003

During 2002, in order to ensure that WBL providers could also easily access the service, a further pilot was undertaken, with the support of Tyne and Wear LSC. As with the original pilot, the providers that took part all volunteered. They ranged from small local organisations to regional offices of national organisations, and provided feedback which drove a review of the Learning PROBE tool and the introduction into the sector of a tool tailored for organisations employing 20 people or fewer – the Micro Business Review (MBR).

Learning PROBE and MBR both depend upon the involvement of a suitably sized team, representing a 'diagonal slice' through the organisation. The team works with an experienced, independent facilitator to develop a consensus view of how the organisation measures up to a range of templates of good practice and strong performance. The facilitator's input ensures that a true consensus is developed, based on the realities of day-to-day life in the organisation, and that it represents a realistic view, truly comparable to those of other organisations in the PROBE databases.

The facilitator provides feedback to the team and their organisation through a presentation and a written report, and proceeds to help with the process of interpreting the emerging lessons and planning appropriate improvement actions. A strength of the PROBE approach to benchmarking is that it works well on two levels – helping individual learning providers to reflect, learn and improve, while simultaneously conducting an invaluable study of the sector as a whole – its strengths, opportunities and development needs.

The Learning PROBE project

Learning excellence, the foundation of the PROBE concept, is based on the proposition that good practice in the management of processes and services leads to high levels of service performance, which in turn leads to superior performance outcomes.

Learning PROBE assesses the practices of individual learning providers and the resulting indicators of performance outcomes, as perceived and measured by the managers and staff of those organisations.

- **Practice** refers to the established processes a provider has in place to design, deliver and measure its service. These include service design such as the design of new courses, service recovery, for example dealing with a learner complaint and rectifying problems, staff involvement and discretion and service culture.
- **Performance** refers to the way a provider's service quality can be measured, including its impact on overall performance outcomes. Examples of external service measures include employers' perceptions of the provider's reliability and accessibility, and learner satisfaction, while internal measures include staff loyalty and morale.

The Learning PROBE programme is ongoing, and by the autumn of 2002 a total of 48 colleges had participated. These form the basis of the analysis presented here. They cover a broad range of college types, sizes and locations within England. Together, they represent more than 10% of all of the colleges in England.

One key issue in interpreting the research data centres on the extent to which the sample of 48 participating colleges is representative of colleges in England as a whole. This sample was typically self-selecting, and as a consequence it can be argued that these colleges are likely to be more quality focused than perhaps a 'typical' sample of colleges. The participants also tend to be colleges that respond positively to offers of support in order to improve their practices and performance. This potentially provides a set of benchmarking results that imply a better picture of the college sector as a whole, although the relative strengths and shortcomings indicated from the study may be representative of the wider picture. It is worth noting, however, that the same is true of other similar benchmarking schemes and studies, against which the colleges' data and findings can be compared.

Learning PROBE was really useful in assessing our position on the key processes, quality systems and procedures that we use in our college. As a consequence, we have chosen to sustain our path to excellence by going down the EFQM Excellence Model route. We have adopted the matrix approach in this and the output from PROBE had a considerable influence on this course of action.

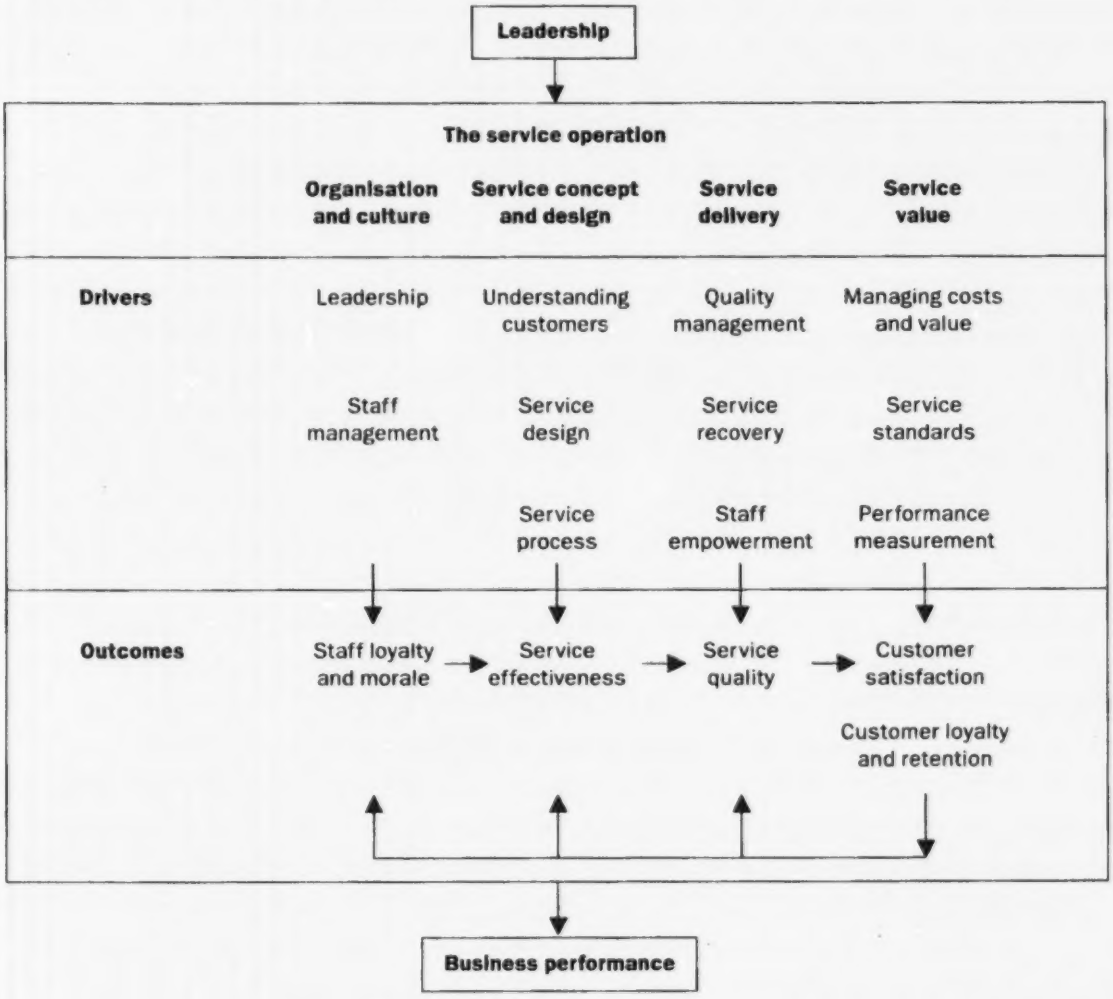
FE college, 2003

Learning PROBE poses 91 questions to the learning provider, covering each of the areas of service practice and performance. Each answer is scored using a continuum scale from '1' to '5', with '5' representing world-class levels of implementation or attainment. To simplify discussion of the results an average score above '3' per attribute is assumed to represent a 'good' level of implementation or outcome (equivalently, an index above 60 for a group of measures), while 'very good' levels are represented by scores of '4' and above or indices of 80+.

The model on which Learning PROBE is based is shown in Figure 2. Major areas shown in the model are: *leadership, organisation and culture, service concept and design, delivery and value.*

- *Leadership* drives the whole service delivery process. Good leadership should emphasise the importance of both customers (including learners, employers and parents) and staff.
- Even a well-designed service will not meet the needs of customers unless it is delivered effectively; therefore, *service delivery* must include appropriate processes for managing the service and responding to customer complaints and problems.
- Leadership contributes to a customer and service-oriented *organisation and culture*, which will, in turn, lead to greater staff loyalty and morale.
- *Service concept* and design is central to good service performance. Service concepts such as those for courses, learner support and learner assessment must be designed to meet customer needs and provide differentiation and distinction in the provider's service offerings.
- *Service value*, as perceived by customers, is created by a well-designed service concept and delivery system, combined with a satisfied, loyal and productive staff.

Figure 2 Service practice and performance model



The performance outcomes of each of these areas will be reflected in the organisation's overall performance. Increasing customer satisfaction, loyalty and retention will increase long-term financial viability and, in turn, lead to long-term growth and long-term success in fulfilling the role of an outstanding learning provider.

Additional benefits of Learning PROBE

As well as the findings described, the study has shown that the participating colleges have been enthusiastic about using Learning PROBE. Apart from the obvious benefit of identifying individual strengths and opportunities for improvement, there have been a number of additional benefits. Learning PROBE encourages colleges to use staff feedback, following the example of the team approach used by PROBE. Many participating colleges are taking part in an organisational review for the first time and find it both a useful way to learn more about the college and an empowering experience. Participating employees tend to feel more comfortable with cross-college work and many have gone on to form a cross-college quality resource. One college used the members of the Learning PROBE team to develop target setting within the college; another used them to form the basis of a quality team. The systematic approach to reviewing processes has also benefited subsequent general quality reviews within colleges and approaches to inspection. A number of colleges have used the experience gained when dealing with external inspections.

PROBE has given the college a snapshot of how all our processes work. The senior management team has discussed its findings and has recognised its value in informing self-assessment and continuous improvement. PROBE was a focus of a training day for our corporation members. In our view, colleges in the sector would benefit from using PROBE, particularly for self-assessment and continuous improvement.

FE college, 2003

Results of the analysis

Overview of results

What do the Learning PROBE results to date tell us about practice and performance in English colleges?

The analysis has examined the relationship between overall management practices in participating colleges and their overall performance. The data shows that there appears to be a strong relationship between practice and performance, supporting the hypothesis that good service management results in better service and business performance, and confirming the findings of earlier PROBE studies. Figure 3 indicates the strong association between the practice and performance indices in the sector.[1]

[1] Statistically, the association is strong, as indicated by the measures ($r = 0.825$, $p = 0.000$). This suggests that the higher the practice index, the higher the corresponding performance index across the college sector as represented by the sample of participants. The significance value ($p = 0.000 < 0.01$) suggests we can be 99% confident that an association exists between the practice and performance indices.

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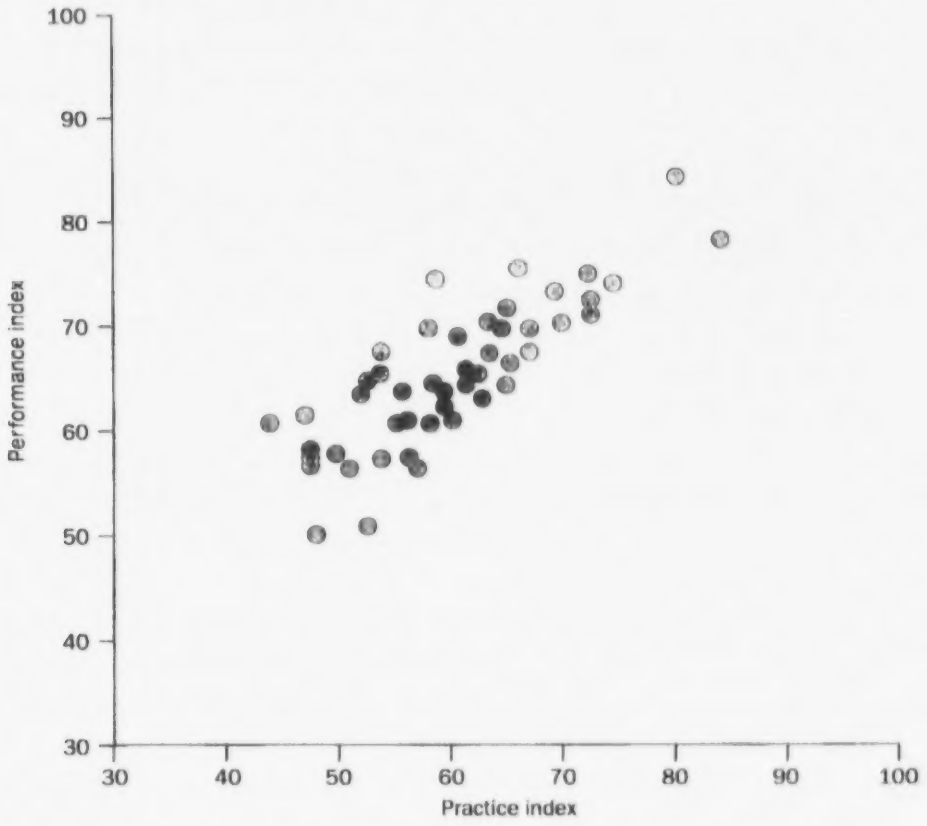
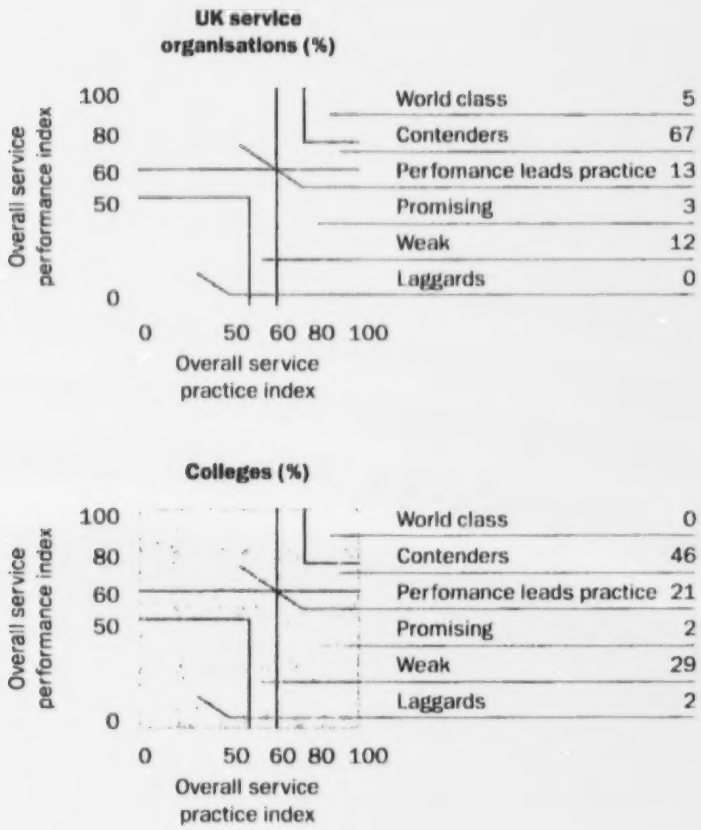
Figure 3 Overall levels of practice and performance



We can compare the spread of practices and performance in the sample of 48 colleges with the 155 UK service organisations benchmarked during the International Service Study (ISS). 'World-class' service organisations are defined as those which have both leading management practices and performance equal to the world's best. These organisations achieve a score of 80% or better in both aggregate practice and performance. Organisations below this score but with scores of over 60% for both practice and performance are considered to be 'contenders'.

28

Figure 4 UK service organisations versus English colleges positioning on world-class practices and performance



None of the colleges has yet achieved the standards of a 'world-class' service organisation (see Figure 4), though one college was very close, compared with 5% of UK service organisations which participated in the ISS. The sample of colleges contains a smaller proportion of 'contenders' for world-class status, and conversely a larger proportion whose overall practices and performance are 'weak'.

It is also noticeable that a relatively high proportion of the colleges display good performance that does not appear to be underpinned by good practice, suggesting that outcomes are achieved at a high cost in financial and human terms, leaving these colleges somewhat vulnerable and ill-prepared for further development or growth.

Practice and performance

The colleges' data has been examined in more detail by developing a number of scales and indices which provide insights into key aspects of practice and performance. The analysis pinpoints a number of practice and performance areas in which there are clearly opportunities for improvement. The analysis also identifies that a number of colleges demonstrate strengths in these same areas, and that overall there are some significant strengths upon which individual colleges and the sector as a whole can build.

Learning PROBE gave the college management team an opportunity to evaluate and improve our business and customer processes.
FE college, 2003

Five scales have been used to group the colleges' practices and performance for analysis purposes. These are:

- leadership
- service processes
- people
- performance management
- results.

Overall mean scores have been calculated for each scale, and for subsets of the scales themselves.

Table 2 suggests that the strongest practices relate to *people*, with the mean index across the sector being clearly in excess of 60. In contrast, the area perhaps requiring the greatest attention is *service processes*, with a mean index of only 56.3 and more than half of the sample scoring below 60.

Table 2 Overall profiles by practice and performance

Overall score	Leadership %	Service processes %	People %	Performance management %	Results %
<50.0	10	31	4	15	4
50.0–59.9	35	29	38	25	27
60.0–69.9	38	33	35	44	48
70.0–79.9	13	6	19	13	19
80.0–89.9	4	0	4	4	2
90.0–100.0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	100	100	100	100	100
Mean	**61.2**	**56.3**	**63.0**	**61.4**	**63.6**

Table 2 also suggests that the colleges are *results* driven, with a clear majority experiencing good levels of overall performance. The belief that good practices potentially lead to high performance is supported by the results shown in Table 3. Associations between the results index and each of the four practice indices are strong and statistically significant, a point that is illustrated by Figure 5.

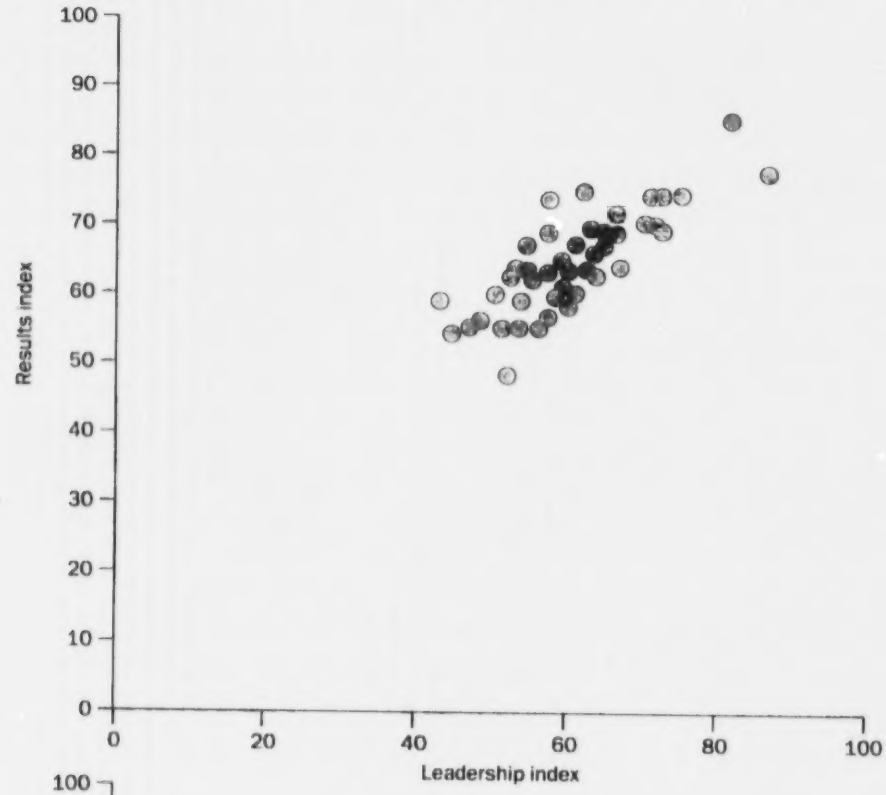
There are also significant levels of association between all the areas of practice, which suggests that levels of practice implementation are consistent (either consistently weak or consistently strong) across the areas examined by Learning PROBE.

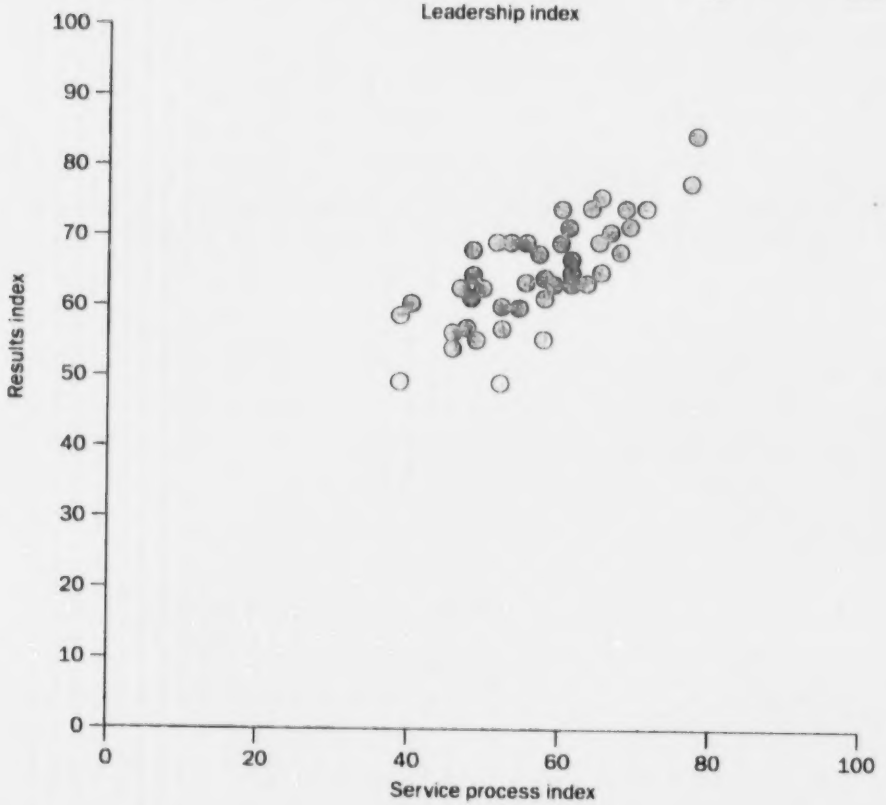
Table 3 Association between groups of measures

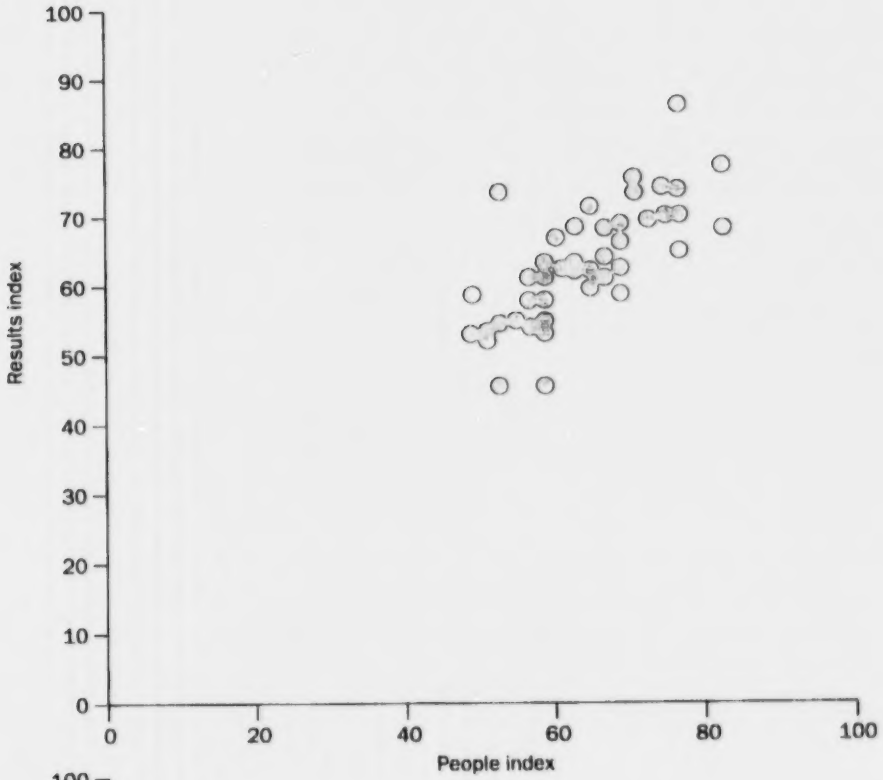
	Service processes	People	Performance management	Results
Leadership	0.884 ♦♦♦	0.837 ♦♦♦	0.856 ♦♦♦	0.809 ♦♦♦
Service processes		0.705 ♦♦♦	0.817 ♦♦♦	0.777 ♦♦♦
People			0.744 ♦♦♦	0.743 ♦♦♦
Performance management				0.749 ♦♦♦

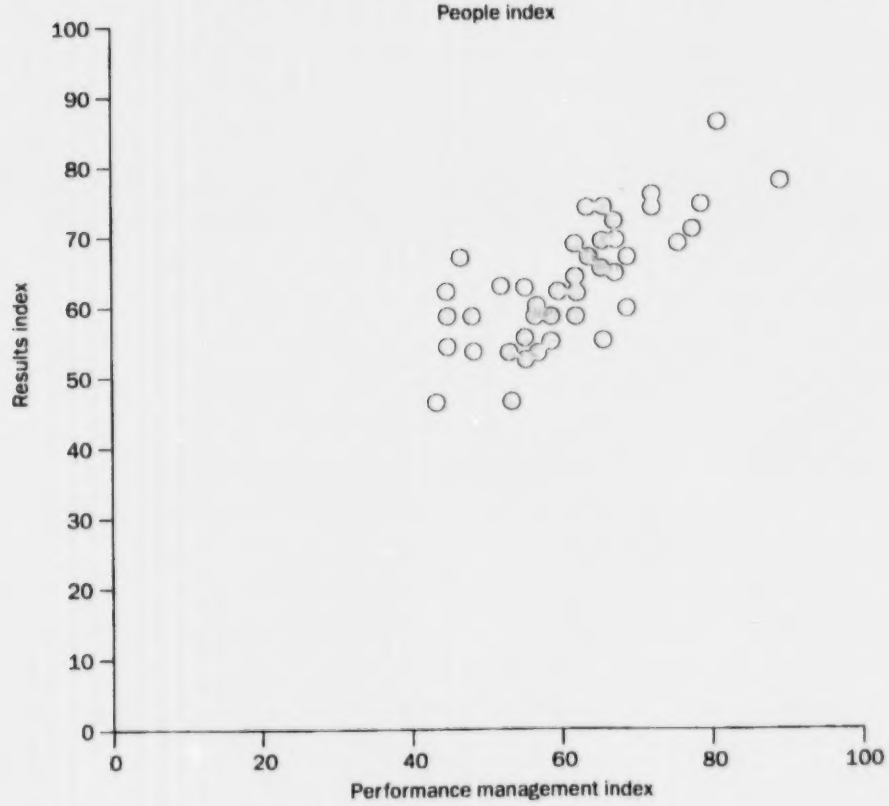
♦♦♦ represents significance at the 0.1% level, ♦♦ at the 1% level and ♦ at the 5% level. All other correlations are statistically insignificant.

Figure 5 Strong associations between practices and performance






Results index
100
90
80
70
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
0
20
40
60
80
100
People index


Results index
100
90
80
70
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
0
20
40
60
80
100
Performance management index

Leadership

There are a number of areas that relate to college leadership (see Table 4).

Relationship marketing is strong, with only 4% scoring poorly for relationship building or customer relations, and 96% of colleges having good levels of implementation, demonstrated by good relationships with many customers and the development of individual customer solutions.

Lower levels of implementation are apparent for *quality leadership* and *supplier relationships*, with 33% and 34% of colleges showing poor attainment. Weaker practices include short-term supplier relationships, a passive role in influencing suppliers and outsourcing strategies having the effect of 'hollowing' the college.

Table 4 Distribution of measures for leadership

Overall score	Quality leadership %	Value orientation %	Market acuity %	Relationship marketing %	Supplier relationships %
<50.0	2	19	19	2	17
50.0–59.9	31	25	31	2	17
60.0–69.9	46	46	31	42	44
70.0–79.9	17	10	15	19	8
80.0–89.9	2	0	4	33	15
90.0–100.0	2	0	0	2	0
Total	100	100	100	100	100
Mean	**62.5**	**56.9**	**60.2**	**68.5**	**61.7**

While almost half the sample understand 'value' in service, maintain proactive support functions and have managers who are starting to 'attack' non-value-added activities, only one college has high *value orientation*. A total of 44% of colleges have poor levels of *value orientation* implementation, failing to focus their services and processes on what really matters to the customers.

Market acuity is the weakest aspect of leadership across the sector, with half of the colleges scoring poorly. Only 9% of colleges provided evidence of teamwork, empowerment and measurement in this area, with only two colleges having high levels of implementation. Strong and significant association exists between all aspects of leadership, as indicated by Table 5. In general, a college which displays strengths in some aspects of leadership displays strengths in other aspects too.

Market acuity

- listening to customers, understanding what drives value for them, focusing on the productivity aspects of value as well as the quality
- clear competitive positioning in the market place
- listening to staff and uses teams
- benchmarking against other organisations to understand better how they serve customers

Table 5 Association between measures of leadership

	Quality leadership	Supplier relationships	Value orientation	Market acuity
Relationship marketing	0.669 ♦♦♦	0.501 ♦♦♦	0.566 ♦♦♦	0.607 ♦♦♦
Quality leadership		0.597 ♦♦♦	0.522 ♦♦♦	0.775 ♦♦♦
Supplier relationships			0.476 ♦♦	0.608 ♦♦♦
Value orientation				0.656 ♦♦♦

♦♦♦ represents significance at the 0.1% level, ♦♦ at the 1% level and ♦ at the 5% level. All other correlations are statistically insignificant.

Service processes

Service processes is the lowest scoring of the five scales. 'Process thinking' is a key theme in the approaches adopted by many of today's leading service providers, but it seems that few colleges have so far adopted a strong process focus in their management and improvement activities. The opportunities for improvement identified in this area are therefore worthy of particular attention.

Service representations

- the tangible elements of services such as the appearance of the buildings and materials
- high accessibility of those services

Many colleges have good levels of *service representations*, but a third do not, reflecting low levels of service accessibility (physical access and/or hours of operation which are more suited to the college and its staff than to the customers) or the standard of physical facilities, resources and materials (see Table 6).

Table 6 Distribution of measures for service processes

Overall score	Mgmt of key processes %	Kaizen %	Moments of truth %	New service dvlpmnt %	Service rprsntns %	e-business %
<50.0	13	33	40	27	10	25
50.0–59.9	38	19	35	15	23	15
60.0–69.9	21	31	21	46	42	40
70.0–79.9	15	10	4	8	15	10
80.0–89.9	15	4	0	4	6	10
90.0–100.0	0	2	0	0	4	0
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100
Mean	**58.1**	**56.8**	**50.1**	**58.5**	**59.6**	**58.5**

Poor levels of implementation of *new service development* practices are displayed by 42% of colleges. They do little to involve customers in the design or development of new courses and associated processes can be ad hoc.

Management of key processes has similar levels of poor implementation, with weaker colleges paying little attention to business processes across departments and functions, and using information technology (IT) just for standard business applications. They could learn from those who focus on defining, mapping and redesigning key processes and investing in IT as a means of redesigning and substantially improving services. *e-business* systems have been implemented by 60% of colleges, allowing customers to search for information through the internet. Some have integration across functions and use IT for improved communication, but only 10% have very high levels of implementation.

The commitment to and processes of continuous improvement are known as *kaizen*, the driving force for excellence in many successful modern organisations. Only 6% of the colleges have very good levels of *kaizen* implementation, while 52% have poor levels.

These colleges provide limited or no staff education and training with a specific 'quality' focus, and have not embedded continuous improvement within their organisation. *Kaizen* is one of the poorer areas of practice implementation identified in the study, along with *moments of truth* (identifying, mapping and managing key interactions between the college and all of its customers) for which three-quarters of colleges score poorly. These colleges have not fully identified critical points in service delivery processes, or put strategies in place for service recovery. They are not proactive in nurturing staff loyalty or in providing service guarantees. Only one college in six shows good attainment in each of these practices.

Statistically significant associations (though only moderate in their strength) exist between nearly all of the pairs of measures in the area of service processes, with the association between *kaizen* and *moments of truth* being particularly strong (see Table 7). Colleges that are strong in some areas of service processes are generally strong in others, and the converse is also true.

Table 7 Association between measures of service processes

	New service development	Mgmt of key processes	e-business	Kaizen	Moments of truth
Service representations	0.439 ♦♦	0.386 ♦♦	0.373 ♦♦	0.419 ♦♦	0.510 ♦♦♦
New service development		0.411 ♦♦	0.387 ♦♦	0.615 ♦♦♦	0.619 ♦♦♦
Management of key processes			0.593 ♦♦♦	0.519 ♦♦♦	0.543 ♦♦♦
e-business				0.425 ♦♦	0.383 ♦♦
Kaizen					0.693 ♦♦♦

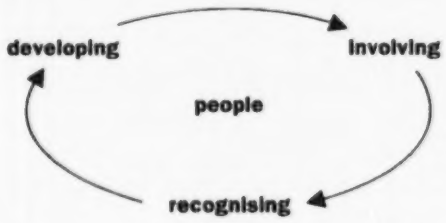
♦♦♦ represents significance at the 0.1% level, ♦♦ at the 1% level and ♦ at the 5% level. All other correlations are statistically insignificant.

People

Many colleges deploy good practices with regard to *empowerment* and being *innovative organisations* (see Table 8). However, practices relating to the *cycle of virtue* are relatively disappointing, with 44% of colleges having poor levels of practice implementation. This *cycle* describes a set of three mutually reinforcing activities: job training and education, staff involvement in improvements and recognition and reward of staff (see Figure 7).

Encouragingly, almost 70% of colleges have good levels of practice implementation for each attribute relating to *empowerment*.

Figure 6 Cycle of virtue



It is notable that those colleges that could do more to empower their staff tend not to identify and respond to service failure, and have yet to develop a culture of staff flexibility to overcome the disadvantages of 'one person, one job'.

Table 8 Distribution of measures for people

Overall score	Empowerment %	Cycle of virtue %	Innovative organisation %
<50.0	8	19	4
50.0–59.9	15	25	10
60.0–69.9	44	38	56
70.0–79.9	21	13	17
80.0–89.9	13	6	13
90.0–100.0	0	0	0
Total	100	100	100
Mean	**64.3**	**58.9**	**65.3**

Colleges with weaker *innovative* practices do not yet display characteristics of a *learning organisation*.

Strong and significant levels of association exist between the three indices, as shown in Table 9.

Table 9 Association between measures of people

	Innovative organisation	Cycle of virtue
Empowerment	0.516 ♦♦♦	0.691 ♦♦♦
Innovative organisation		0.734 ♦♦♦

♦♦♦ represents significance at the 0.1% level, ♦♦ at the 1% level and ♦ at the 5% level. All other correlations are statistically insignificant.

What do college staff tell us about their colleges?

Of the first 48 colleges to complete Learning PROBE, 20 also participated in a recent staff survey administered by LSDA (Owen and Davies 2003). Views were expressed by 2644 staff of these 20 colleges.

Many staff think highly of a number of aspects of the college and its work, which they also regard as important, including:

- understanding their own role and contribution
- the support they receive from their own manager
- staff working well together in teams
- embedding equal opportunities in college culture.

However, few aspects included in the survey attracted positive responses from a majority of respondents. The following aspects exhibit particularly large gaps between staff's expectations and their perceptions of the current situation in their colleges:

- staff feeling valued, having their views sought and seeing opportunities for progression
- involvement in planning and targets, shared goals between academic and support staff
- job security, ability to take risks without fear of failure
- effectiveness of management decision-making, communication, provision of necessary information and resources.

Many staff (55%) believe that their colleges are good at encouraging feedback from customers; but only 28% believe that they act effectively upon that feedback, and 34% that complaints are dealt with effectively.

Colleges classified through Learning PROBE as 'performance leads practice' and 'weak/laggards' have proved likely to have the greatest gaps between staff's expectations and their assessment of the current reality in their college. This is particularly the case in terms of organisational issues such as senior management style, communication, college infrastructure and use of customer feedback.

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Performance management

Balanced scorecard

Using measures that cover both drivers (operational performance, organisational learning and growth) and results (financial performance and customer/market performance)

The majority of the colleges have implemented good levels of practice relating to *performance management* (see Table 10). However, with respect to *balanced scorecard* implementation, 36% limit their measurement to a rather narrow, traditional focus on things they have to measure rather than a proactive quest for knowledge that will help them to improve. Some place little emphasis on the implementation of formal quality measurement systems outside those required by the funding body or procedures for making positive use of customer complaint data to drive improvements. These weaker colleges may have systems for reporting only the statutory performance requirements and have limited measurement of customer satisfaction. There are some good examples of balanced scorecard implementation within the sample, with one college in eight showing strong levels of implementation across the board.

Over 40% of colleges have poor practices for implementing *service standards*, tending to afford inadequate support for staff, having few actual service standards in place or implementing standards that are easily achievable. In these colleges, the understanding of service quality remains unclear.

Strong and significant association exists between the two practice areas, suggesting that those colleges which have good management systems in place are more likely to have a larger number of challenging, well-understood service standards.

Table 10 Distribution of measures for performance management

Overall score	Balanced scorecard %	Service standards %
<50.0	13	17
50.0–59.9	23	25
60.0–69.9	46	42
70.0–79.9	6	13
80.0–89.9	10	4
90.0–100.0	2	0
Total	100	100
Mean	**62.6**	**59.7**

Results

Overall, the colleges' operational and business results are better than the corresponding levels of practice, suggesting potential vulnerability among a substantial number of the colleges, whose current performance levels, however good, are not supported by comparable systems and practices and may perhaps be unsustainable.

The best results are for *business performance*, with only 16% of colleges scoring poorly (see Table 11). In contrast, 84% perform well in terms of margins, returns and positive cash flows and, overall, almost a quarter of the colleges have very strong business performance.

Table 10 Distribution of measures for results

Overall score	Customer growth %	Service quality %	Organisational productivity %	Results for stakeholders %	Business performance %
<50.0	4	6	11	15	10
50.0–59.9	31	21	11	31	6
60.0–69.9	35	44	61	29	40
70.0–79.9	19	25	11	13	21
80.0–89.9	10	4	7	10	21
90.0–100.0	0	0	0	2	2
Total	100	100	100	100	100
Mean	**62.9**	**64.3**	**62.6**	**57.9**	**67.2**

The next best area of performance is *organisational productivity*. Only 22% of the colleges exhibit poor performance, while 79% have displayed static/increasing market share and improving levels of productivity.

Similar performance has been attained in terms of *service quality*, although 27% of colleges score less than 60. These low-scoring colleges need to address staff morale, the clarity of their service role, how they meet customer needs or the levels of service differentiation. Weaker colleges also have a tendency to let down their customers, have quality levels which are poor relative to the sector, and employ staff who are seen to respond slowly or have variable levels of courtesy. They endure customer complaints, have decreasing levels of customer satisfaction or have customers who perceive lower levels of value. Encouragingly, no colleges score poorly in all areas, with one in four having good levels of performance, although only 4% attained an index of 80 or more.

Poor levels of *customer growth* are shown by 35% of colleges. They may have no recent innovations in service, slower rates of development, high rates of learner drop-out and loss of local partnerships or a declining customer base. Only one college has all of these shortcomings, with almost 60% displaying good performance and one in ten attaining high levels of growth.

The poorest levels of performance relate to *results for stakeholders*, reflecting the fact that almost half of the colleges have either a high staff turnover or an attention to social and environmental issues that is restricted to compliance.

In general, there are high levels of inter-association between the various aspects of performance – if a college achieves good results in one area, it is likely to display good results across a range of areas (see Table 12). The association between *service quality* and *customer growth* is particularly strong.

Table 12 Association between measures of results

	Organisational productivity	**Service quality**	**Customer growth**	**Results for stakeholders**
Business performance	0.408 ♦♦	0.155	0.276	0.140
Organisational productivity		0.489 ♦♦	0.420 ♦♦	0.230
Service quality			0.769 ♦♦♦	0.408 ♦♦
Customer growth				0.405 ♦♦

♦♦♦ represents significance at the 0.1% level, ♦♦ at the 1% level and ♦ at the 5% level. All other correlations are statistically insignificant.

Work-based learning providers

Benchmarking of colleges has been ongoing since 2000. During 2002, with support from Tyne and Wear LSC, the programme was extended to include WBL providers. The pilot involved deployment of Learning PROBE in this new setting, and also the use of a related tool, the Micro Business Review[2] (MBR), with a number of smaller WBL providers. It established that these tools could work well for WBL providers, and identified some refinements that would ensure their effectiveness and acceptability across the newly enlarged learning and skills sector.

The early months of 2003 are seeing a new wave of benchmarking through Learning PROBE and MBR, involving large numbers of both WBL providers and colleges. This programme will generate new findings, which will be published in due course. Early indications are that there will be some common ground between the patterns of practice and performance identified among WBL providers and those already found among colleges.

The benchmarking session proved to be a rich team-building exercise and has added to the continuing development of the team members. We covered areas that we have not discussed together previously and shared information and ideas that will make a difference both to our learners and the organisation overall.

WBL provider, 2003

[2] The Micro Business Review tool was developed by Newcastle Business School and Business Link County Durham, working with a number of 'micro businesses', employing 20 people or fewer, to develop a benchmarking tool which incorporates the strengths of the PROBE approach and is tailored to the needs and language of this size of business. It draws on methodologies previously developed by NBS and West London TEC for small to medium sized enterprises.

Work-based learning providers

Emerging strengths include:

- business management
- employee empowerment and involvement
- innovative and responsive staff.

There is room for improvement in several practice and results areas:

- process management, quality-focused leadership, performance management
- service quality, productivity, societal results.

We identified closely with the main areas for improvement highlighted by the benchmarking survey. They have been accounted for in our business plan. This practice is what all organisations should be engaging in to improve performance and sustain successful results.

WBL provider, 2003

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Challenges facing the learning and skills sector

It is clear that learning providers deploy some strong practices and achieve much in terms of their organisational performance, and that there are many opportunities for one provider to learn from others about specific things that they do better, and with better results. However, the clearest lessons to emerge so far from the Learning PROBE programme are that:

- on the whole, participating colleges lag behind other UK service providers in terms of their practices and performance; there is much that the sector could learn by studying the practices of strong performers in other sectors
- the current deployment of Learning PROBE with large numbers of WBL providers is likely to identify similar patterns to those displayed by the colleges
- one of the colleges' weakest practice areas is continuous improvement; if the sector is to close the practice and performance gap on other service providers, it must first catch up with modern practices in the field of quality, improvement and the management of change.

Colleges' strongest practices relate to their *people*, with empowerment and innovativeness featuring strongly. While this is a promising sign, it is accompanied by some warning signs that also emerge from the data. First, there is the high proportion of colleges whose performance outstrips their practices. Second, there is the finding that *service processes* are colleges' weakest area of practice. Taken together, these findings raise the possibility that relatively strong performance is in some cases being 'bought' through the efforts of staff willing to expend extra efforts to overcome the shortcomings of poor systems, practices and/or resources.

If this is the reality of life within some learning providers, then the sustainability of this situation needs to be questioned, along with its cost-effectiveness in both the short term and the long term.

Another contributory factor to the high number of colleges whose performance leads their practice could be inadequacies in some aspects of *performance measurement and management*. Learning providers need to ensure that they are managing by fact, not by anecdote or 'hunch', in terms of key aspects of the performance of their processes and services.

Although *people* practices are generally quite strong, some aspects of leadership could be stronger, and the virtuous cycle of developing, involving and recognising staff lags behind other *people* practices. These current shortcomings will need to be addressed as a matter of priority if major changes are to be achieved within the sector, and if continuous improvement is to be embedded as a driver for future success.

Appendix Taking part in Learning PROBE

Getting approval

If you would like to take part in Learning PROBE it is important that the senior management at your organisation is committed to using the tool. Give them a copy of this publication and explain the benefits of the process and the staff involvement that it requires. Once you have obtained approval contact the LSDA to discuss the next steps. You will be sent some information to help you to get started on the project.

The team

The make-up of the Learning PROBE team is important to the success of the project. The team should be multi-level and multi-functional, both teaching and administrative/support staff, comprising approximately eight to ten people. A coordinator should be appointed, who need not necessarily be at senior management level. There should be one senior manager or director within the team.

Choosing the team is critical. Individuals should be chosen for their knowledge of the learning provider and ability to take part in a workshop such as this. The results must be owned by the team, and must reflect the position of the learning provider at that time, based on a consensus of opinion from the team. Once the team has been decided, contact the LSDA to arrange a date for the facilitator to visit (this can be done sooner if necessary).

The questionnaires will now be sent out to you.

The questionnaire

The team's job is now to complete the questionnaire. A copy should be given, with a covering memo/verbal explanation, to each team member. It is suggested that each member reads and attempts to answer all questions, but if there are a few specific questions that some individuals simply cannot answer this is not a problem. As appropriate, team members should collect any data relevant to their area that may be needed for completion of the questionnaire. If there is no finance-based person on the team the finance team may have to be contacted to help with some of the questions.

The coordinator should also complete the coordinator questionnaire and should submit this to the facilitator in advance of the facilitation day if possible, or at the latest at the beginning of the facilitation day. The coordinator may consult colleagues about the answers to these sections, and/or may wish to involve the whole team in discussing some of them.

The team should convene before the facilitation day to go through the main questionnaire. This will take approximately 2–4 hours, so it is wise to leave half a day free. This is to check that there is a full and common understanding of the questions, and to identify questions for which there is already a broad consensus, and those for which there is a wide range of scoring. The reasons behind scoring differences should be discussed, but it is not necessary to arrive at consensus scores for all of the questions at this meeting.

Once the questionnaire and initial scores have been fully discussed, nothing should be done until the facilitation day, which will take place at the learning provider's premises.

The facilitation day

The facilitation session takes place to ensure that the quality of data being entered into the database is maintained. It also ensures that the team has complete understanding of the questions as applied to their learning provider. The facilitators are fully trained with current knowledge of best practices and benchmarking processes. Facilitators may work alone, but regularly 'double up' to ensure that a consistent approach continues to be applied.

- Initially the facilitator should have a short introduction to the learning provider (explanation of services and functions; introduction to a range of personnel; tour of facilities if appropriate). Following this, he/she can meet the team and proceed to facilitate a discussion of the questionnaire, leading to verification of consensus scores. It is helpful for the facilitator to have a record of the range of scores that were awarded to each question by each team member (preferably in advance of the day), so that he/she can establish which questions may need greater discussion in order to reach the consensus required.
- Once the session is completed, which typically takes around 4–5 hours, the facilitator will need approximately 1 hour to prepare the analysis.
- At the final feedback session the facilitator will report to the team the results of their self-assessment.

The report

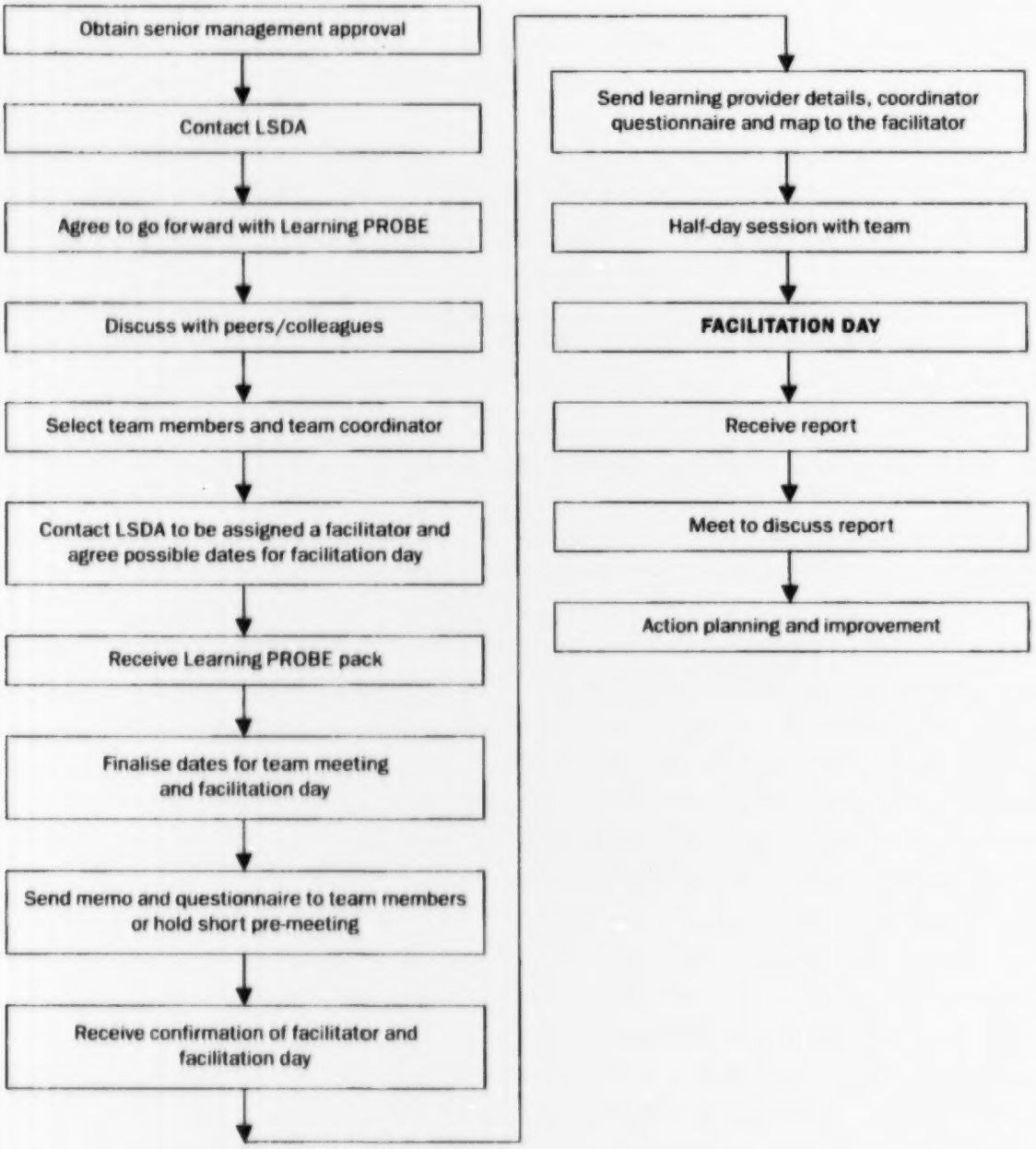
At this point, the 'on-site' process is complete. The facilitator will take the results away for further analysis. A report will be produced and will be forwarded along with the relevant charts within 2 weeks of the facilitation day.

Next steps

It is important that the report is not the end of the process. You should arrange to meet, if possible as a whole team, to discuss the report and to decide how best to present the results and take the project forward. At this point the original management commitment will pay dividends.

Organise an action planning session that involves senior managers to identify priorities that have been recognised and develop solutions and improvements.

Learning PROBE steps


Obtain senior management approval
Contact LSDA
Agree to go forward with Learning PROBE
Discuss with peers/colleagues
Select team members and team coordinator
Contact LSDA to be assigned a facilitator and agree possible dates for facilitation day
Receive Learning PROBE pack
Finalise dates for team meeting and facilitation day
Send memo and questionnaire to team members or hold short pre-meeting
Receive confirmation of facilitator and facilitation day
Send learning provider details, coordinator questionnaire and map to the facilitator
Half-day session with team
FACILITATION DAY
Receive report
Meet to discuss report
Action planning and improvement

Additional information can be obtained by calling Jane Owen on 020 7297 9083 or e-mail jowen@LSDA.org.uk

Useful links

The **Learning and Skills Development Agency** offers support to learning providers through its RQA (Raising Quality and Achievement) Programme, including helping providers to join the Learning PROBE benchmarking programme and to make use of related tools and approaches.

Contact Jane Owen
020 7297 9083
jowen@LSDA.org.uk
www.LSDA.org.uk

The **Centre for Business Excellence** at Newcastle Business School, Northumbria University, researches the effectiveness of approaches to continuous improvement and the diffusion of good practice and innovation, working with partners and clients to identify and apply the best available ideas and test them in real-world situations.

Contact David Yarrow
0191 227 3922
david.yarrow@northumbria.ac.uk
www.northumbria.ac.uk

The **CBI** supports the deployment of Learning PROBE as an extension to its Best Practice activities, which include making the PROBE suite of benchmarking tools available to its members. CBI draws upon the research gathered through PROBE as an input on its lobbying and good practice exchange and dissemination activities.

Contact Mindy Wilson
020 7395 8186
Mindy.Wilson@cbi.org.uk
www.cbi.org.uk

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53

raising quality and achievement programme

If learning providers can become learning organisations, their services will be delivered more and more effectively.

With this in mind, the Learning and Skills Development Agency selected PROBE, a tool that has assisted 3000 organisations across the world to review their performance and practices, and worked with its creators to develop Learning PROBE, a version for the learning and skills sector.

This publication explains how PROBE was developed and adapted for the sector, resulting in the use of Learning PROBE and its small business version by almost 100 colleges and work based learning providers by April 2003. It also reflects the lessons learnt by the first 48 learning providers to complete the Learning PROBE benchmarking process.

ISBN 1 85338 836 X

54

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